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# *On-Line Community Information Network*

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## **What is FreeNet?**

The Vancouver Regional FreeNet is a quick and effective way for people and organizations in the community to share information and communicate with each other. FreeNet is a community computer service which is free to use, interactive, and available 24 hours a day. It features:

### **Access to Information**

FreeNet provides easy access to a wide variety of community, government, business, medical and legal information as well as calendars of events and transportation schedules.

### **Discussion Areas**

FreeNet is an electronic forum enabling community discussions on any areas of interest, including politics, community issues, environmental concerns or hobbies.

### **Expert Advice**

Community organizations and individuals can make their expertise available to other FreeNet users in areas as diverse as medicine and mechanics.

### **Electronic Mail**

FreeNet enables you or your organization to send and receive electronic messages (email) with other FreeNet users, whether in Vancouver or around the world.

### **Gateways to Other Public Electronic Services**

FreeNet provides a gateway to other public electronic services such as the Vancouver Public Library, community organizations, or government agencies.

## **Why FreeNet?**

The information age has arrived and already there are real inequities. Many groups and individuals do not have the resources to own a computer, access networks, make their information available online, or exchange information by computer. Like the public library, FreeNet provides equity by enabling all members of the community to use the technology which is defining our time.

## **Who will use FreeNet?**

The FreeNet is accessible to all members of the community, through public access terminals in libraries or through their computers and modems at home. Users come from all levels of society. FreeNets around the world have become integral

sources of information for their communities.

## **How Does It Work?**

FreeNet consists of a central computer system dedicated to storing and retrieving thousands of information files and relaying thousands of electronic messages each day among community members and organizations.

When the Vancouver Regional FreeNet begins operation in early 1994, anyone will be able to access FreeNet using public terminals in libraries and eventually other public locations such as schools, senior citizens' centres, government offices, and community centres. FreeNet can also be accessed by computers in homes and offices across the Lower Mainland.

## **How Will FreeNet Help My Organization?**

FreeNet enables your organization to increase its visibility and accessibility to the community. Your organization can make its information available quickly without printing or mailing costs. FreeNet also helps your organization respond to community issues in a timely manner.

Electronic discussions allow your organization to easily interact with other community members. FreeNet is an ideal forum for your organization or client base to raise issues that might not be adequately covered by other media.

An example of how one organization has benefitted from its involvement with FreeNet is the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa-Carleton. It uses the National Capital FreeNet, located in Ottawa, to publish its newsletter, display a calendar of events, provide conference announcements, and ask for volunteers in its help-wanted section. The Alzheimer Society also moderates a question and answer forum, maintains a wandering person registry, and distributes support information for family and caregivers.



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## *Becoming an Information Provider*

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### **How can my organization get involved?**

Your organization can easily get involved with the FreeNet by becoming what we call an information provider. An information provider may be an organization or an individual who offers information or expertise in a specific area.

### **What kinds of organizations participate?**

The Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association is actively looking for organizations and individuals to become involved as information providers. We are seeking a broad and diverse range of information in a variety of areas.

For example, some of the community organizations on the National Capital FreeNet in Ottawa include the Ottawa Multicultural Folk Arts Council, the AIDS Committee of Ottawa, Amnesty International, Citizens for Safe Cycling, the *Ottawa Citizen*, and municipal and federal governments.

### **What kinds of information can my organization provide?**

Some very broad guidelines have been created to help organizations provide exciting and community-based content for FreeNet users. The Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association suggests that information provided be:

- broad and representative of the community at large;
- localized, particularly reflecting the area of the Greater Vancouver Regional District;
- complementary to information from other services;
- timely and current; and
- dynamic and exciting.

Your organization will choose the level of its involvement with FreeNet. This may be as simple as a note about your organization. You may also want to publish an online version of your newsletter. You might even want to moderate a public discussion area or a question & answer forum.

### **What kind of support will the FreeNet provide?**

#### **Information Provider Liaisons**

When your organization becomes an information provider, a Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association member will be assigned as your FreeNet liaison. This person can always be contacted for further information or assistance.

#### **Information Provider Sessions**

As the FreeNet approaches its start date, detailed Information Provider Sessions will be held regularly. These sessions will be designed to teach information providers how to prepare and maintain their information on the FreeNet. Information providers will be contacted when these sessions are scheduled.



# About the Vancouver Regional FreeNet

## MANDATE

*In February 1993, a group of volunteers met with the goal of creating a FreeNet in the Vancouver area. On June 10, 1993, the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association was incorporated as a non-profit society.*

## Goals

1. To develop, operate and own a free, publicly accessible community computer utility in the Lower Mainland of BC providing the broadest possible range of information and possibilities for the exchange of experience, ideas and wisdom.
2. To establish and operate a full FreeNet community computer utility in the Lower Mainland of BC.
3. To encourage the development of a wide range of community electronic information resources.
4. To encourage the broadest possible participation of information providers in making their information available on the FreeNet.
5. To work toward the widest possible public access to government and other information through FreeNet and other non-profit organizations such as libraries.
6. To work toward building a network of similar services in cities and towns internationally.
7. To work with other Canadian FreeNets to create a Canadian freenet network.
8. To educate and encourage the public in the use of computer telecommunications and information retrieval.
9. To research ways to improve and expand public access to and use of electronic information resources and facilities.

## How can my organization participate in FreeNet?

### Send in a letter of endorsement

Your organization's support is important to the continuing success of the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association. A letter of endorsement is enclosed in this package; please sign it and send it in to the FreeNet. Letters of endorsement from a wide range of organizations demonstrates support of the FreeNet to donors and funding agencies.

### Provide information

Many organizations provide information that is valuable to FreeNet users. The Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association is actively seeking organizations who would like to provide information.

### Make a donation

Your financial contribution will help pay for the telephone lines and equipment needed to operate the FreeNet. Your donation of computer equipment will be passed on to other

information providers who lack computer resources.

### Volunteer

FreeNet is completely run by volunteers, people like you, who feel a sense of pride in sharing with the community. Volunteers are needed in the following areas:

- Fundraising
- Community outreach
- Publicity and training
- Membership
- User interface design
- Hardware and software support

**Become a member of the FreeNet**  
Organizations cannot have a membership on the FreeNet.

However, we encourage individuals within organizations to become members. Membership in the FreeNet society gives you a voice in the FreeNet. Importantly, it also provides monetary support for the continuing growth of the FreeNet.

## For more information

### How to Reach Us

Our address is c/o 750 Burrard Street, Vancouver, BC, V6Z 1X5. Our telephone number is 665-3944. If you leave a message, a FreeNet representative will return your call.

### Orientation Sessions

There are monthly orientation sessions for community members and organizations that are interested in learning about the FreeNet. Along with a general introduction to the FreeNet and a live demonstration, speakers from each of the FreeNet committees will describe their activities. This is an opportunity for you to ask questions.



## Getting Started

### How do I prepare my information?

#### What information can my organization put on the FreeNet?

Organizations can use FreeNet to distribute information about themselves or information that they have collected. They may also host discussion areas, providing community members with a way to send in questions and comments about organizations and their services.

The information that an organization provides should be word processed text. This may include your organizational goals and objectives,

lists of services, schedules, instructions, newsletters, directories, and papers. You can even provide computer databases.

#### Moderating a Discussion Area

Information providers moderate a discussion area by introducing topics, leading discussion, answering questions, and encouraging users to feel comfortable expressing opinions on a wide range of topics.

The discussion is not like an ordinary conversation where the questioner expects an immediate response.

Rather, community members send questions or comments that your organization responds to on a regular basis.

#### What Kind of Equipment Does An Organization Need?

To get information onto the FreeNet, an organization should have access to a computer with a modem.

If your organization does not have this equipment, our Task Force for Equal Access may be able to provide assistance.

### CHECKLIST FOR INFORMATION PROVIDERS

*To assist in the process of becoming an information provider, the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association has created the following checklist*

- ☐ 1. Assign a person from your organization to act as a contact for the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association.
- ☐ 2. Complete the enclosed letter of endorsement.
- ☐ 3. Fill out the Information Provider Form and mail it in to the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association with the letter of endorsement. A FreeNet liaison will call your organization's contact person when your form is received. Your contact and the FreeNet Liaison will ensure that your organization is aware of current developments with the FreeNet and that the FreeNet is aware of your needs.
- ☐ 4. Consider having at least one member of your organization become a member of the Vancouver Regional FreeNet Association, so that your organization can participate in the future development of FreeNet. A membership form is included in this package.
- ☐ 5. Begin preparing your information. A detailed brochure to help you prepare your information will be available in fall 1993. However, if your organization has a computer, formatting your information into regular computer text files now will save time when the FreeNet is ready to accept information.